

C 96-26
A Banquet of Song
(*A Feast for the Ears . . .*)

Donna Bennett, soprano
&
Brian Finley, piano



March 2, 1996 at 8 pm
Walter Hall, Edward Johnson Building
Faculty Artist Series
University of Toronto, Faculty of Music

A Banquet of Song

(A Feast for the Ears . . .)

L'Aperitif

Without a Song (*Great Day*, Youmans) ← (MISSED THIS SONG)

Grace

Ave Maria (Bach/Gounod)

First Course

Una donna (*Così fan tutte*, Mozart)

O mio babbino caro (*Gianni Schicchi*, Puccini)

Mein Herr Marquis (*Die Fledermaus*, J. Strauss, Jr.)

Second Course

Fantaisie-Impromptu, Op. 66 (Chopin)

Third Course (Children's Menu)

Still now and hear my sing . . . (trad. Inuit lullaby)

Lullaby for Benjamin (B. Finley)

Adam's Morning (B. Finley)

Champagne

Vilia's Song (*The Merry Widow*, Lehar)

Poor Wandr'ing One (*The Pirates of Penzance*, Gilbert & Sullivan)

INTERMISSION

Sorbet

Del cabello mas sutil (Obradors)

Fourth Course - from the Country

The Trees They Grow So High (Somerset Folk Song, arr. Britten)

Oliver Cromwell (Nursery Rhyme from Suffolk, arr. Britten)

A Breath of Fresh Air on the Terrace

Clair de lune (Debussy)

The Dessert Trolley

Love's Old Sweet Song (Bingham & Molley)

Oh Mother! Take the Wheel Away ("Claribel")

Coffee & Liqueurs

When I Grow Too Old to Dream (*The Night is Young*, Romberg & Hammerstein)

If I Loved You (*Carousel*, Rodgers & Hammerstein)

Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man! (*Show Boat*, Kern & Hammerstein)

Program Notes

The opening lines of Shakespeare's *Twelfth-Night* read "If music be the food of love, play on!" So arose the inspiration for tonight's concert: *A Banquet of Song (a Feast for the Ears)*. We have assembled a musical menu made up of a sparkling array of tastes. Included are some of our favourite arias from the opera platter, as well as salty British folk songs, steaming Broadway classics and even some original 'recipes'. So welcome to the Banquet; *Bon appetit!*

After the refreshing aperitif *Without a Song* composed by Vincent Youmans for his Broadway show *Great Day*, we move into 'grace'. Charles Gounod (1818-1893) was born into a family of artists and musicians, and in his time, was considered "a poet and musician of a very high order." Being naturally disposed toward composition for the voice, he is chiefly remembered today for his many operas, including *Faust* and *Romeo et Juliette*. He also composed much church music and over 130 songs. The famous *Ave Maria* was set in 1859, and uses as its accompaniment the first Prelude from J.S. Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier*.

The three characters Despina (from Mozart's *Così fan tutte*), Lauretta (from Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*) and Adele (from Johann Strauss Jr.'s *Die Fledermaus*) have in common youth, vibrancy and an infectious sparkle. All three characters show brilliance, with and a certain conniving ability as is seen in these charming excerpts. Leave it to the maid or the daughter to teach (or outwit) the ladies-in-waiting, the father or the master! This is the stuff operas are made of!

Following the storms and rainbows of Chopin's *Fantaisie-Improvisation*, we introduce you to three songs written with children in mind, but which are by no means restricted to their pleasure alone! The first two are included on our recent CD: *Lullabies for Benjamin* (Marquis Classics; ERAD 155). *Still now and hear my singing* is a hauntingly simple Inuit lullaby performed without accompaniment. *Lullaby for Benjamin* was composed for our eldest son in 1993, and is the 'older brother' of *Adam's Morning* composed in 1995 for our younger son. They are lullabies and love songs, both . . .

Operetta plots are often even more complicated than those of opera. Suffice to say that Anna (Lehar's *Merry Widow*) and Mabel (from *The Pirates of Penzance*) are out to 'get their man!' Two wonderful arias, each different in approach, but exactly the same in intent!

As a refreshing sorbet, we offer Obradors' *Del cabello mas sutil*. One of the loveliest songs of this Spanish composer, its lyric is perhaps one of the most evocative for an intimate romantic dinner, so long as the table is a booth, at the back, in a corner in the dark!

With Benjamin Britten, opera in 20th Century England experienced a blossoming which lay dormant since the time of Henry Purcell. In addition to his wonderful work in the theatre, Britten also found time to compose three volumes of "Folk Songs from the British Isles." The two pieces included on tonight's program are among the most famous of these gems. In each, Britten composes a sublimely colourful accompaniment to take the traditional folk song into a world of its own.

The evocative *Clair de lune* is the third of the four pieces which make up Claude Debussy's *Suite bergamasque* (1890-1905). It is interesting to remember that Debussy was rather a pioneer in this form of impressionistic composition, having for musical rivals such composers as Brahms, Wagner and Tchaikowsky. Without a doubt, a composer with a unique voice...

We enter the 'parlour' with the next three Victorian chestnuts. Misty eyes and soft smiles are warmly provoked by these musical memorabilia! *Love's Old Sweet Song*, composed by James Molloy to words by J. Clifton Bingham still enjoys a faint but sure familiarity. *Oh Mother! Take the Wheel Away* is a classic 'jilted lover' song so kindred to Victorian sentiments. This type of unrequited, rejected love ballad became increasingly popular as the century progressed, moving even into the music-hall. "Claribel" was the pen name for Mrs. Charlotte Alington Barnard (1830-1869) who wrote the words and music of over one hundred songs. Although considered 'vapid' by various critics, she was certainly one in tune with her time!

We close with three of our favourites from Broadway: *When I Grow Too Old to Dream* (*The Night is Young*), *If I Loved You* (*Carousel*) and *Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man!* (*Show Boat*). All three share the genius of one great librettist: Oscar Hammerstein II. Whether working with Sigmund Romberg, or as part of the historic team of "Rodgers & Hammerstein", or in conjunction with Jerome Kern, Hammerstein's words filled many theatres (as they do today) and inspired several leading composers of the twentieth-century.

Program notes by Brian Finley

Born in rural Ontario, Donna Bennett grew up in a musical home. Her mother sang, and her father played the piano with the Army Band, and arranged music for such wartime heroes as Wayne & Shuster. With weekly two hour trips to Toronto for singing lessons, Donna fell under the spell of opera during a performance of *Tristan und Isolde*, and from then on music was her future.

Originally from Montreal, Brian Finley grew up in a number of cities including Los Angeles, Nairobi, and Calgary. Music was always a part of his life, as were several other creative venues including writing, acting, composing and arranging music for anyone who would join him! With an ARCT at the age of 17, Brian headed for the Faculty of Music, U of T where he earned both Bachelor and Master degrees in Piano Performance, and where he met Donna . . .

Over the next eight years, Donna pursued the finest in international training, receiving full scholarships to the Munich Musikhochschule and later, the Opera School of the Royal College of Music, London. Before long, she was performing at some of Europe's finest operatic venues including festivals in London, Edinburgh, Montepulciano, Neuburg, Berlin and Munich. With her sparkling stage presence and beautiful voice, she was hailed by London's Daily Telegraph as "a talent to watch out for" and was actually proposed to by Leonard Bernstein after singing the role of Dede in the British premiere of his last opera *A Quiet Place!* She also became a favourite of the German composer Hans Werner Henze, whose opera *The English Cat* she performed several times in various parts of Europe under the composer's direction.

Meanwhile, now Donna's fiancé, Brian remained in Canada working with the Russian pianist Boris Lysenko and entered several international piano competitions including those in Cincinnati, Washington, Lisbon, Vienna and Montreal. At that time, Brian was also one of three Canadians to be invited to compete in the Eighth International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in Moscow which lead to exposure on Moscow Television. Finally in 1985, Donna & Brian were married, moved to London, England where Brian worked with the great Schnabel student, Maria Curcio. While Donna sang opera, Brian enjoyed successful appearances at St. Giles (at the Barbican Center), St. James's (Piccadilly) and at Wigmore Hall, and with the Dallas Symphony.

Then in 1989 came the invitation from Vienna for Donna to sing the role of Christine in the Viennese production of Webber's *Phantom of the Opera*. On the eve of accepting the contract, she discovered she was pregnant, so with Brian, they returned to Canada to "have a Canadian". Unsure of where to settle, they stayed in Donna's home town of Campbellford, where they subsequently bought a house on the banks of the Trent River. After the joyous birth of Benjamin in February, 1990, the entire family returned to Europe twice for tours of *The English Cat*, with Donna singing, and Brian as rehearsal pianist, assistant conductor and ...nanny! Career opportunities continued to develop in Canada, including appearances with the Canadian Opera Company and various orchestras for Donna, and several concerto performances and radio work for Brian. In addition, Brian founded the *Brian Finley and Friends Concert Series* at Victoria Hall in Cobourg, Ontario in 1991, where Donna is a frequent and favourite guest artist!